
The Cultural Work of Sejong the Great

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A Political Problem in Mid-Reign

Although Sejong was a very strong monarch, the Korean monarchy itself had serious institutional and political limitations. In theory, the king was not only the head of government, whose person was sacred and whose word was law, but the very father of the state, the apex of the hierarchical pyramid that formed the structure of both government and society. In practice, however, he was closely checked by the higher bureaucracy, especially by formal organs of remonstrance which had the responsibility of scrutinizing the actions of the king and the government as a whole. In addition, the official royal tutors, nominally in charge of the king's Confucian formation, had traditionally exercised remonstrance functions as well. The king who wished to execute policy had to steer it between all these censorial forces and also among various administrative organs. In China, which also had a Confucian system of government, there was a despotic tradition that allowed the ruler to override and even to dismiss, humiliate, or even execute such critics. But in Korea the bureaucracy had genuine countervailing power that usually ruled out such monarchical caprice; the king had to fight and persuade. There were times, indeed, when the king seemed to be all alone in his government.

One such case was the controversy over the crown prince's administrative powers, which consumed so much of the court's time and energy in the last thirteen years of Sejong's reign. From around the mid-1430s, Sejong did not enjoy good health, and in 1437 he was sufficiently ill to announce that he wished to turn the lesser matters of state over to the crown prince, reserving for his own decision only high political matters and

appointments and national security issues. His official tutors, who were concurrently high appointees in the various ministries and departments, argued that this was too sensitive and radical an innovation, one strongly opposed by all the traditions and precedents of Confucian rule. The filibuster was so vigorous that Sejong had to drop the matter. But three months later he raised it again, this time with his chief state councillor, the venerable Hwang H'ui, complaining specifically of rheumatic difficulties. Hwang, who was then seventy-four and would live to be ninety, seems to have been too healthy to understand the king's problem. He assured Sejong that he was only forty, in the prime of life, and that in such prosperous and stable times as Chosŏn then enjoyed there was no precedent for turning responsibilities over to the crown prince. Hwang's reservations were not without some merit; such an administrative arrangement, which came close to dual monarchy, was perhaps easier to propose than to carry out. It was not always easy to decide what was "major" and what was "minor," and bureaucrats could understandably have cause to worry about the consequences of misjudging such a question. The old Confucian adage was: "There are neither two suns in the sky, nor two rulers in the kingdom." So on this occasion too, Sejong dropped the matter. Twice in the next two years he pressed further for administrative help from the crown prince, but still in vain. "In two or three years, you will have to follow my wishes," he warned his officials.

But nothing happened in two or three years, and Sejong's health did not improve. In 1442 he again raised the issue, revealing that his eyes were troubling him so much that he could not keep up with paperwork. Treatments at the hot springs of Ich'ŏn had given relief but no cure. But again the senior bureaucracy turned a deaf ear. Finally, in 1443, tired of any further discussion and having exhausted every possibility for harmonious com-

Page 1053